

Manuscript paper formats of the Mamluk period: the contribution of Mamluk chancery paper

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1. Introduction

One of the most challenging issues concerning the manuscript production in the Mamluk realm regards its support, i.e. paper. It is a well-known fact that it is quite difficult to establish objective criteria which permit to determine whether a given type of paper was produced in a given area in Islam due to the absence of filigrees. Some recent studies have brought forward another analytical system to identify and date some papers produced in the Mamluk realm: on the basis of the chain lines, their number and their disposition, it is now possible to date the use of a specific model. Another question that has not been enough addressed deals with the paper formats. Even though it is possible to figure out what these formats were approximately on the basis of the manuscripts that have reached us, it remains obvious that these measures are to be taken for what they are: an estimation. Manuscripts were trimmed during the binding process and this could happen several times during the life of a manuscript. Jean Irigoin, the famous French codicologist, proposed a reconstruction of the size of three formats of paper used in the Orient with a maximum and minimum measure for each side, keeping in mind that the smallest side of a format always corresponds to the largest of the next format in order to respect the ratio of 1.4/1.5 which allows to get regular quires whatever the folding (Irigoin 1988; Irigoin 1997). For trimming, Irigoin took in consideration an average of 1 cm. However, a sample of the result of trimming, a chip of paper, dateable to the mid-15th c. provides a different result: this scrap, as you can see, corresponds to the part of a sheet of paper that was trimmed to remove the irregular edge and that was reused by the renowned Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī. It measures 1.9 cm in its narrowest part and 2.1 in its widest. This means that the average of 1 cm probably needs to be reevaluted.

Another approach considered by some specialists of Oriental paper and codicology consisted in studying the formats of the paper produced for the Mamluk chancery.

2. Status questionis

The Mamluk chancery, as its predecessors (the Fatimids and the Ayyubids, and even before the Abbassids), made an extensive use of paper for the various categories of documents issued by several ranks of officials. The vast majority of these documents were emanated on scrolls made of